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ABSTRACT

Community service is a voluntary contribution to the commonweal that teaches valuable lessons about the responsibilities of citizenship in a free society. Vital services are provided through thousands of organizations created to meet needs not otherwise provided for by government. Participation in these community service projects help create a sense of concern for the public good and a commitment to voluntarism so essential to the future of the United States. Students at every level of school can participate in these projects and thus learn many social studies skills, including data gathering, critical thinking, and decision making. Community service programs also teach civic participation processes and skills, including group interaction, leadership, cooperation, and political influence. Service activities build positive bonds between youth and the institutions of our society and strengthen student academic performance and self-esteem. Service brings together students from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Fourteen characteristics of exemplary community service programs are cited, including the principles that: (1) community service must meet genuine needs; (2) it must have real consequences; and (3) it must require significant personal responsibility and decision making. Five nationally recognized school-based programs are given as examples of ongoing community service programs that teachers and curriculum specialists might study. A 13-item bibliography is included. (JB)

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COMMUNITY SERVICE AND CIVIC EDUCATION

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Community Service and Civic Education

by Kathleen Kirby

Community service is a voluntary contribution to the commonweal that teaches valuable lessons about the responsibilities of citizenship in a free society. Long ago Alexis de Tocqueville reported the American penchant to solve problems through voluntary associations. Today, vital services are provided through thousands of organizations created to meet needs not otherwise provided for by government at the local, state, and national levels. These activities help create a sense of concern for the public good and a commitment to voluntarism so essential to the future of our nation. This ERIC Digest discusses (1) connections of community service programs to civic education in schools, (2) positive outcomes of community service programs, (3) characteristics of exemplary programs, and (4) model school-based programs.

How Is Community Service Connected to the Social Studies Curriculum in Schools? At every level of school, students can be directly involved in community service projects. In the primary grades, one of the goals is for students to learn basic civic values that include fair play, respect for the opinions of others, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in our society. Through participation in community service programs, very young children can learn how to solve problems, participate in groups as leaders and followers, and accept responsibility for their decisions and actions. In addition, children develop knowledge of their community—its leaders, institutions, social groups, and standards of civic behavior.

As students in the middle grades continue to develop their civic values, they are also developmentally ready to study the history of voluntarism. These students can learn how people participate to resolve local issues. This can include examination of why people volunteer and utilization of adult community volunteers as resource persons to work with the young people. Students in the middle grades can volunteer to work as tutors for younger children or as helpers in senior citizen centers and child care facilities.

Many high school courses involve civic participation. At this maturity level, students can identify the needs of their schools and communities and design and implement projects to meet these needs. Types of community service projects include tutoring slow learners, helping the elderly, supervising "latchkey children" after school, and cleaning and beautifying neighborhoods and schools. Coursework can support and enrich these activities. There are many examples in our country's history of voluntarism that students can study, such as the community spirit and cooperation of pioneers during the westward movement.

Community service programs can teach many social studies skills. These include higher-order cognitive processes and skills, such as data gathering, critical thinking, and decision making. Community service programs also teach civic participation processes and skills, including group interaction, leadership, cooperation, and political influence.

What Are Likely Positive Outcomes of Community Service Programs in Schools? Service activities build positive bonds between youth and the institutions of our society by

- preparing youth for broad-based involvement in community service as adults,
- building links between schools and the community,
- promoting civic knowledge,
- teaching basic skills needed by employers,
- strengthening attachments to family and community,
- providing alternatives to delinquent behavior.

Service strengthens student academic performance and self-esteem by

- promoting personal and intellectual development,
- providing a close view of social processes and institutions,
- stimulating interest and reducing negative attitudes,
- helping young people to see the connection between what they learn in school and the real problems faced in their communities,
- influencing personal and social responsibility, civic involvement, commitment to basic democratic values, and development of self-esteem,
- imparting a sense of personal worth and capability for leadership and problem solving.

Service brings together students from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. It enables students to give something back to their schools and communities. It creates positive partnerships between students and adults by encouraging youth to make the transition to adulthood as contributing and caring members of society. Finally, it encourages a lifelong commitment to the service ethic.

What Are the Characteristics of Exemplary Community Service Programs? Research conducted by Conrad and Hedin (1982) reveals six elements that enhance the value of service programs:

- Community service must meet genuine needs and involve tasks that both the students and community deem worthwhile.
- Community service must have real consequences so that others are dependent on the students' actions.
- Community service must present significant challenges, placing students in new roles, in new environments, and calling on new skills in situations that stretch their cognitive and ethical capacities.
- Community service must require significant personal responsibility and decision making, in which the students are "in charge."

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- Community service must involve collaborative effort with adults and peers.
- Community service must provide systematic reflection on experiences, including extensive and ongoing discussion and written analysis.

The National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (1989), in addition to the preceding elements, recommends these guidelines for exemplary community service programs:

- Articulate clear service and learning goals for everyone involved.
- Allow for those with needs to define their needs.
- Clarify the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.
- Match service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances.
- Expect genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment.
- Include training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.
- Ensure that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved.
- Work toward program participation by and with diverse populations.

The degree to which the preceding characteristics are present determines the degree of success in the community service experience. When these elements exist, the outcome is likely to be effective education for responsible citizenship.

What Examples of Ongoing Community Service Programs Can Be Recommended to Teachers and Curriculum Specialists? The following are examples of nationally recognized programs.

Charleston, North Carolina—Youth Service Charleston: The Wood for Warmth program provides free firewood for low-income families.

Tucson, Arizona—Student Service Learning, Tucson Unified School District: An elementary school invites senior citizens to a weekly lunch program called "The Pleasure of Your Company."

Los Angeles, California—Youth Community Service, Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Los Angeles Unified School District: Students assist in literacy programs, volunteer with the Red Cross, tutor in after-school "latchkey" programs, and paint over graffiti.

Springfield, Massachusetts—Community Service Learning, Springfield Public Schools: Each school in the district develops a plan to help students connect what they learn with how they live.

Minnetonka, Minnesota—Community Involvement Class, Hopkins High School: Students receive credit for community service internships, participate in a community service class, and develop all-school community service projects.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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